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Editor's Note

Amy Nguyen's profile "Bonsai: A Way of Living" blends form and content effectively; the tone of the piece is as calming as the subject matter. She achieves this effect by using stylistic techniques: imagery, diction, and even punctuation. For example, notice how the words "harmony," "flow," and "energy" precede the image of Nguyen's father meditating. She later describes her father bending down to work with the Bonsai. She writes, "his stance is like a person playing pool, the same facial expression . . ." Instead of merely stating that her father concentrates on his Bonsai, she uses a simile to show her readers how her father ponders each step carefully.

Nguyen also synthesizes the research about Bonsai's history with her father's perspective in order to reach her own conclusion. Rather than just writing an essay about her father, she focuses on the principles behind this ancient art practiced in modern American culture. She writes that "we can work with nature by enhancing it, but we cannot perfect it." Do you agree? Does she make the essay meaningful to a larger audience by expanding the scope to include anyone who appreciates nature?

Bonsai: A Way of Living

Amy Nguyen

Every aspect of bonsai, pronounced *bon-sigh*, meaning "tree in a tray" in both Chinese and Japanese, is a form of art that spiritually connects the crafter of the bonsai and the bonsai itself with nature. Bonsais are ordinary trees that are pruned, shaped, and trained to look like a desired form. Having been around my father's bonsais my whole life, I have watched him craft his plants into something of great meaning and beauty. Bonsai is a skill that takes practice and patience, and because there is so much time involved, few actually take the time from their busy schedules to try bonsai. Bonsai has become a lost art: an ancient oriental art form that changed my father's way of life.

Having immigrated from Vietnam in 1979, you would think that my father took up bonsai before he came to the United States. However, he did not take interest in bonsai until he moved to San Luis Obispo. "This area is calm and peaceful compared to Los Angeles; I didn't even know what bonsai was when I lived in Vietnam . . . my brother showed me the bonsais he crafted; I was fascinated by his skills and wanted to learn more" (Nguyen).

Most people think that the art of bonsai originated in Japan, but in fact, it began in China and was known to the Chinese as *punsai*. The Chinese captured the spirit of nature through the flow of change, known as Taoism, the conception of Yin and Yang, and how the universe is governed by the opposing, but complementary forces. Early bonsai in China were crafted to resem-

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ble dragons, serpents, birds, and other animals; it was a transformation of trees through the art of imagination. When bonsai was introduced to Japan it took a different turn in style before it spread to the rest of Asia. Viewed as a highly refined art form, the Japanese tried to emphasize the spirit of the bonsai and the natural look, not wanting to show any form of human intervention (Bonsai).

My father believes that through meditation, the state in which we relax the body and allow our minds to be free of all thoughts, we achieve a chi, an essence that is attuned to our surroundings and spirit. Bonsai helps my father attain many things other than just possessing the ability to create beautiful plants. The thought put into crafting and caring for a bonsai seems meditative and enables him to be closer to nature. My father expresses that to truly understand the art of bonsai, a person must understand the philosophy behind this ancient art form.

Zen Buddhism and Taoism are the philosophy of how some people live and think, and how the flow of energy comes in harmony with nature. Our minds function naturally when we learn to follow the flow of life, and only then does our creativity develop within us. From bonsai he has also taken up the art of meditation. “Meditation helps relieve tension in my back and neck, the pain and stress seeps out of my skin and flows down the waterfall” (Nguyen). He admits he doesn’t have time to do this everyday, and wishes he did. I remember watching him meditate during the summer. He would sit on his wooden bench next to the pond for hours waiting for the sun to set. “The sound of the waterfall is soothing and it’s the perfect way to end the day . . . bonsai is more than an art, it’s a way of living” (Nguyen).

The concepts behind bonsai changed the way my father approaches life—how he deals with different situations. He tells me that even though he loves his job as an Operating Systems Analyst at Cal Poly, it is sometimes stressful. I have watched him work, I have seen the complexity of his job, and I don’t know how he keeps everything so nicely together even at hectic times. His coworkers say he is the type of person who makes work more enjoyable, and they love working with him. My father is often on the computer all day, and from that, I can see why some would have the tendency to explode.

I learned to tame my frustration from bonsai, not through bonsai, but from it . . . you cannot bonsai through frustration, you must loosen your mind because what you feel inside is what you will craft . . . the result will be something you hate, which will lead to more anger . . . stress and frustration are not the same thing, we can work stress out of our body but frustration is something we must learn to control (Nguyen).

Although the concept of bonsai is calming, the process is filled with intertwining thoughts and emotion. My father gave me a bonsai with copper wiring still wrapped around the fragile branches, but if those wires are uncoiled, the

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tree itself will grow out of form: the structure my father intended it to have. When the desired look of the bonsai has mutated into something else, the creator will have to completely start over to make the bonsai look like its preferred shape again. Nature is constantly changing; given care, plants persistently grow, and though bonsai may seem like an art of striving for perfection, it simply is not. We can work with nature by enhancing it, but we cannot perfect it.

I watch my father work on the bonsai he gave me for my response paper. Working from his gardening cart, he has the bonsai on a turntable so he is able to spin the bonsai instead of physically picking it up each time he has to view the other sides. “Picking up the bonsai is a disruption of the mind, it breaks concentration and you might not be able to visualize again what you saw before, it becomes a lost idea” (Nguyen). His cart is as high as a kitchen counter top and he bends down frequently to view the bonsai at eye level. He does this for about five minutes, just looking at the bonsai before he even starts to touch the tree. “I don’t use gloves; gloves only get in the way. They are bulky and I need to actually feel what I’m working with” (Nguyen). His hands move swiftly around the branches as he uncoils the copper wires, little leaves fall off but not many. Finished with the unwiring, he again pauses for another five minutes. Bending down at eye level, he spins the bonsai around gently, viewing it as though he had gotten the plant for the very first time. His stance is like a person playing pool, the same facial expression, and the same look in his eyes. “I’m thinking,” he tells me. I ask him about what. “You have to plan ahead,” he says, “You have to visualize the idea before you begin or you’ll get lost in the process, I don’t know how, but you will . . . you see, we must learn to plan ahead, that is what we should do in life” (Nguyen). He takes a few steps away from the cart and continues to look at what he has to work with. In the middle of his deep concentration, he goes to the shed and comes out with a support belt for his back and his green bonsai tool box. Taking out his trimming shears, he starts pruning the branches, “I’m trying to clean this tree up; the new branches are growing in the wrong direction and are disrupting the flow of energy” (Nguyen). He points to a specific branch on the lower left and clips it, points to another one on the right and trims it a little. I really can’t see how he can tell which branch doesn’t belong; I guess through many years of practice, you just know.

Each crafted branch on a bonsai represents the many swerving paths taken in life, each leading off into its own direction and not one bends the same way. The paths are already sculpted for us, yet it’s up to us to choose which one to take. What will lead us in the right direction is our patience and self worth. My father is unique through artistic expression and the same holds true for bonsai; not a single bonsai is the same even if he attempted for them to be. Every person has their own voice and their own beliefs. What we say and how we act contributes to our personal voice. Each bonsai my father makes

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connotes a different tone, mood, and different emotional feelings depending on the shape and style. Therefore when we discover the deeper meaning of bonsai, we find ourselves.

Works Cited

An Introduction to Bonsai. 2002. 18 Jan. 2007 <<http://bonsaisite.com>>.

Nguyen, Long. Personal Interview. 30 Jan. 2007.

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